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ABSTRACT

Input from a course syllabus in advanced university level English as a second language composition was compared with student intake as manifested in the linguistic product (i.e., compositions). The frequencies and types of classroom, teacher, and textbook explanation of sentence control, paragraph organization, and rhetorical control were carefully monitored and logged. An equally careful record of student writing was kept. The quantity of exposure to various writing concepts was compared to an objective and a holistic evaluation of control over these concepts. The students' last three compositions in the course were analyzed to determine the effect of carefully controlled input on intake. Of the five phenomena selected for study--paragraph organization, logical organization, use of subordinating conjunctions, use of main clauses, and use of coordinating conjunctions--there was improvement at the end of the course in all except subordinating conjunctions. (JB)

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INPUT VS. INTAKE IN AN ADVANCED ESL
COMPOSITION CLASS

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ABSTRACT

Corder (1974) noted that "the simple fact of presenting a certain linguistic form to a learner in the classroom does not necessarily qualify it for the status of input, for the reason that input is 'what goes in' not what is available for going in, and we may reasonably suppose that it is the learner who controls this input, or more properly his intake."

This paper reports a study in which input from the course syllabus and intake manifested in the linguistic product (i.e., compositions) were compared. Data for this paper were collected from an advanced university level ESL composition class using Barrett (1970) and Lawrence (1972).

More specifically, the frequency of input was compared with the intake in a composition class. The frequencies and types of classroom, teacher, and textbook explanation (input) of sentence control, paragraph organization, and rhetorical control were carefully monitored and logged. An equally careful record of student writing (i.e., manifestation of the intake) was kept. The quantity of exposure to various writing concepts was compared to an objective and a holistic evaluation of control over these concepts. In analyzing these data, the researcher tried to answer

the following research questions: 1) Was there any meaningful relationship between the amount of intake and input? 2) Does frequency of input have an appreciable effect on the intake process?

INTRODUCTION

That children follow a similar course in the acquisition of their mother-tongue is now well known and well documented. Corder (1973) asked whether speakers of the same mother-tongue learning a second language all follow the same course of development. Corder pointed out that there were powerful interfering factors involved in the second language learning process: intelligence, knowledge of the world, motivation, social background, and an externally imposed syllabus. Corder suggested that there might be an internal syllabus involved in second language learning:

Might there not also be an internal syllabus for learning a second language which would represent the 'psychologically natural route' between mother tongue and the target language, determined by the inherent cognitive properties of the human mind but conditioned by the particular properties of the two languages involved? (Corder 1973: 268)

In another article Corder (1974) proposed that the internal syllabus helped to determine a second language learner's intake, i.e., what the learner actually acquired from the syllabus and teaching. One can conclude from Corder's remarks that there might be a built-in program which determines a natural sequence of learning for the second language learner. Furthermore, if the study of second language learning is to be concerned with the psycholinguistic search for universal processes, a distinction must be made between input and intake for the second language learner:

In the case of the second language learner, it might be supposed that we do have some knowledge of what the input has been, since this is largely within the control of the teacher. Nevertheless it would be wise to introduce a qualification here about the control of input (which is of course what we call the syllabus). The simple fact of presenting a certain linguistic form to a learner in the classroom does not necessarily qualify it for the status of input, for the reason that input is 'what goes in' not what is available for going in, and we may reasonably suppose that it is the learner who controls this input, or more properly, his intake. This may well be determined by the characteristics of his language acquisition mechanism and not by those of the syllabus. (Corder 1974:23)

Corder's hypothesis is that the learner controls the intake in the second language learning process. The intake process may be influenced by the acquisition mechanism as shown in Figure 1.

 Put Figure 1 About Here

To date at least two researchers using empirically based studies have tried to explain what determines input to the second language learning process. Hatch (1975) found that young ESL learners acquired those questions first which they were asked most frequently. Larsen-Freeman (1976) also offered the frequency hypothesis as one conceivable explanation for the similarity of her oral-production morpheme sequence to the morpheme sequence order reported by Dulay and Burt (1974). Using the Bilingual Syntax Measure as an elicitation instrument, Dulay and Burt and Bailey, Madden and Krashen (1974) found a similar acquisition order of grammatical morphemes for young Chinese and Spanish-speaking ESL students and adult learners of disparate mother tongues. Larsen-Freeman (1975a) in a follow-up study using the BSM found that "language

background did not have a significant effect on the way ESL learners order English morphemes." She noted that different tasks produced different morpheme orders, but her morpheme orders from the speaking and imitation tasks correlated significantly with those found by Dulay and Burt. Larsen-Freeman (1976) offered several explanations for "why ESL learners consistently exhibit the oral production morpheme order that they do."

One possible explanation for similar oral production morpheme sequences is frequency of input. Larsen-Freeman concluded:

The reason the morpheme ranks obtained from the speaking task correlated with the number of times the morpheme was supplied in that task could be that when a subject has more opportunities to attempt a morpheme on a given task, incremental learning can take place. As a result, a score for a certain morpheme would increase proportionate to the number of times the morpheme is attempted.

...Perhaps the frequency counts of morphemes on the speaking task reflect their actual occurrence in real communication. Thus, if a subject encountered certain morphemes more than others, he was likely to score higher on those morphemes, all other things being equal.

...Thus, the tentative conclusion is that morpheme frequency of occurrence in native-speaker speech is the principal determinant for the oral production morpheme order of second language learners. (Larsen-Freeman 1976:130-132).

PROCEDURES

METHODS AND SUBJECTS

This paper reports the results of a study whose focus was to determine whether there was any meaningful relationship between input and intake (Corder's hypothesis) and to determine whether frequency was a determinant of intake (Larsen-Freeman's hypothesis). The data were collected during the fall 1979 semester at Southern Illinois University

at Carbondale from the Linguistics 290 class. Linguistics 290 is a three credit-hour composition course designed for foreign graduate and undergraduate students who need further work in composition in English as a foreign language beyond their entering TOEFL scores or successful completion of Basic English Composition for Foreign Students and either Expository Writing for Foreign Students or Technical Writing for Foreign Students. After the drop-add-waive procedure had been completed, the class roster stabilized at seven: one Indonesian, one Japanese, three Chinese, and two Farsi. Their majors were Computer Science and Linguistics. Barrett (1970) and Lawrence (1972) were the required texts. The Barrett text was used to present instruction on topic sentence, thesis statement, and paragraph formation. The Lawrence text was used to present information on logical organization and structure vocabulary. Additional handouts and classroom explanation on grammar points and related composition phenomena were presented by the instructor. Each presentation and explanation on the subject matter was logged and tabulated.

Five phenomena were selected to be studied: paragraph organization, logical organization, the use of subordinating conjunctions (complex sentences), the use of main clauses (simple sentences), and the use of coordinating conjunctions (compound sentences). There were 53 separate presentations on paragraphing, 37 on logical organization, 25 on the use of subordinating conjunctions, 16 on the use of main clauses, and three on the use of coordinating conjunctions. Table 1 lists the rank order of these constructions according to the frequency with which they were presented (ordered by the syllabus).

 Put Table 1 About Here

For purposes of quantifying manifestations of intake, the final three compositions from each student were analyzed. It was assumed that analyzing the last three compositions was a more valid procedure than evaluating a single composition. The researcher used a five-point holistic scale to evaluate paragraph organization and logical organization: 1 - weak, 2 - poor, 3 - average, 4 - good, 5 - excellent. To evaluate the students' control of complex, simple, and compound sentences, the researcher determined the percentages of error-free sentences for each sentence type. At this stage of the research there were two kinds of data: whole numbers for paragraph organization and logical organization and decimal fractions for the sentence types. The sentence-type data were converted to standard scores so they could be compared with the organization data.

The holistic evaluations for paragraph organization were summed for the three compositions from all students and averaged. The same procedure was conducted for logical organization, percentage of error-free complex sentences and so on. The means were rank ordered and adjusted for ties. The rank orders for input and intake are shown in Table 2. A non-significant, negative rank order correlation was obtained between the input rank and the intake rank. There was no meaningful, i.e. significant relationship between the frequency with which a concept was presented during the term of the course and the extent to which it was

controlled in the last three compositions written during the course. In fact, the tendency seemed to be that the more a concept was presented, the less control of it was manifested in the last three compositions.

The negative correlation obtained between the input and intake rank orders led the investigator to wonder whether there had been any improvement in the writing ability at all as manifested in the aforementioned variables. The investigator had administered Davidson's (1978) Test of Ability to Subordinate to the class during the first and last weeks of the term. Davidson's test is a 45-item diagnostic test of the ability to subordinate for intermediate and advanced level students. In addition, the investigator analyzed the first three compositions written by each student, quantifying data for the five variables previously mentioned. The data in Table 3 effectively represent the equivalent of pre-tests and post-tests. The first three compositions were written during the first two weeks of the term and the initial administration of Davidson's test given before the class had had much instruction on paragraph organization, logical organization, subordinating conjunctions, main clauses, and coordinating conjunctions. The Davidson test was administered on the last day of class and the last three compositions were written after all classroom presentations and textbook assignments had been completed.

Put Table 3 About Here

As Table 3 indicates, there was improvement on five of the six

variables from the beginning to the end of the term. Only percent of error-free compound sentences decreased. Yet, there was significant improvement on paragraph organization, and by strict interpretation there wasn't significant improvement on that variable because the researcher prefers the .01 level as the criterion level of significance for language research data rather than the .05 level which is too weak.

LIMITATIONS

Before the findings and implications of this study can be discussed, its rather large list of weaknesses and limitations must be outlined. This study is an example of a modified one-group pretest-post-test design. The initial administration of the Davidson test and the analysis of the first three compositions can be construed to be a pretest.

Next, the subjects were exposed to the instructions on paragraph organization, logical organization, complex sentences and so on. The final administration of the Davidson test and the three final compositions can be construed as a post-test.

This study has many factors which jeopardize its internal and external validity. A study's internal validity permits the researcher to determine whether the classroom instruction and syllabus, in this particular study, alone influenced the result, the intake rank order. A study's external validity allows the researcher to generalize the results of the study to other settings and populations.

First, the subject pool was too small. Second, the researcher could not determine whether the assignments for the first and last compositions

were equally difficult. Third, the Linguistics 290 students may have been unfamiliar with the format of the Davidson test on the initial administration. It is possible that a strange format can depress pre-test scores because the subjects do not understand what's expected of them. Fourth, there was no control group from which base line data could be collected and measured against the performance of the Linguistics 290 group. Would a randomly chosen group of students who were not subjected to the researcher, the Lawrence and Barrett texts, also have shown improvement on the six variables from mid-August to mid-December 1979? From this study there is no way the researcher can or cannot make that claim. In other words, could the Linguistics 290 students have improved just as much without classroom instruction? The researcher's intuition is that they could not have improved, but there is no empirical basis for that intuition.

It would be possible to control many of these confounding variables by using a true experimental design like the Solomon Four-Group Design (cf. Campbell and Stanley 1963:24). The Solomon Four design entails a population of subjects randomly assigned to four groups. There are two experimental groups and two control groups. Pretests are administered to one control group and one experimental group. The other control and experimental groups are not given the pretest. The two experimental groups receive the experimental treatment. Finally, all four groups are given the same post-test. The beauty of the Solomon Four design is that it allows the researcher to measure the performance of the experimental pretest group against its own gain scores and against the post-test

scores of the other three groups.

While the researcher finds the results of this study interesting, it is too dangerous to generalize to other settings and populations. The results seem to support Corder's notion that there is a difference between input, what's available for going in, and intake, what actually goes in. In addition, it seems that the learners' inherent cognitive properties are impervious to frequency. That is, whatever determines what goes in is not sensitive to frequency. From Table 2 it is evident that the input rank order based solely on a criterion of frequency was negatively correlated with the intake rank order which was based on an holistic evaluation and an objective measures' evaluation

analysis of the product of the learning process. The researcher assumed that the learners' intake was manifested in the product of the learning process, the writing work samples.

Were this study to be replicated with a research design that controlled for the confounding variables that jeopardize internal and external validity and results found similar to those in this study, Corder's hypothesis would have empirical justification. The frequency explanation offered by Hatch and Larsen-Freeman should then, on the other hand, be reconsidered for its validity. It is not the researcher's intent to try to use the findings of this study to refute Hatch and Larsen-Freeman. It is the researcher's intent to gently suggest that future empirical second language acquisition research be conducted using tightly controlled research design^s to preclude the many weaknesses which have been highlighted in this study.

Figure 1
The Intake Process

The learner determines
the intake

Process

Product

Intake

Output

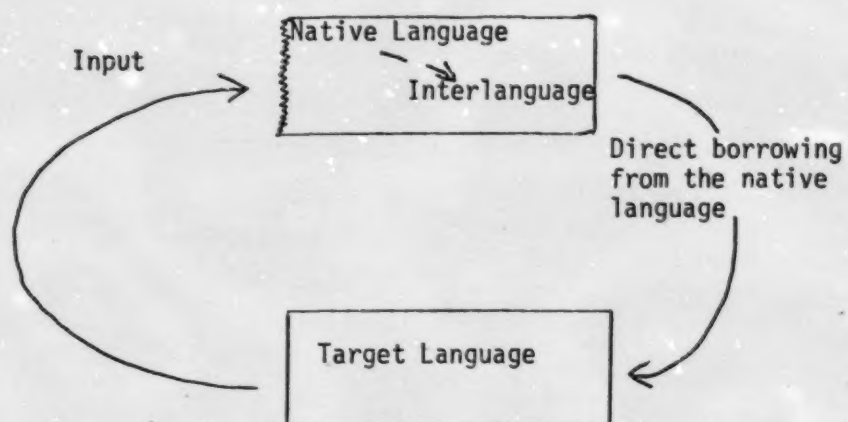


Table 1
Input Rank Order
Based on Frequency of Presentation

<u>Number of Times Presented</u>	<u>Variable</u>	<u>Rank</u>
53	Paragraph organization	1
37	Logical organization	2
25	Subordinating Conjunctions (complex sentences)	3
16	Main clause (simple sentences)	4
3	Coordinating Conjunctions (compound sentences)	5

Table 2
Input and Intake Rank Orders

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Input</u>	<u>Intake</u>
Paragraph organization	1	2
Logical organization	2	5
Complex sentences	3	4
Main clauses	4	2
Compound sentences	5	2
rho= - 0.2		

Table 3
Scores from the Beginning and End of Term

Variable	First 3 Comps		Last 3 Comps	T-Value	df
Paragraph organization	$\bar{X}$	2.05	2.761	2.588 ^a	39
	SD	.759	.943		
Logical organization		2.4	2.857	1.498	39
		.994	.910		
Percent error-free complex sentences		28.95	42.4	1.489	39
		.219	.331		
Percent error-free simple sentences		47.7	57.7	1.131	39
		.282	.274		
Percent error-free compound sentences		39	22.1	1.424	39
		.424	.308		
Test of ability to subordinate		31.83 (pre)	34.16 (post)	1.132	5
		4.21	6.43		

^a $p < .05$ for two-tailed test

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